

'Like a Prince From Another Planet'

By CHRIS CHASE

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Pop

'Like a Prince From Another Planet'

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ON Friday night, June 9, an air of shabby carnival hung over Seventh Avenue. The sidewalks around Madison Square Garden teemed with kids and toothless old men hawking Elvis pennants, Elvis posters, albums of Elvis pictures. There were cops on horses and cops on foot, and vendors with brown paper bags containing Elvis T-shirts circulated among the ticket-holders. But few ticket-holders stopped to buy. They kept moving toward the arena, their excitement so palpable it seemed to cut through the muggy twilight.

Elvis Presley had never before sung a live concert in New York, and some of these fans had been waiting 17 years.

Inside the Garden, excitement turned to awe. Around a raw wood stage were ringed thousands and thousands of seats and, by the time Elvis came on, every one of them would be filled. Not to see a hockey game, or a world's championship prizefight, but to view—in person—one man. One man can fill this place, you told yourself in disbelief. All by himself, he's a team, he's a convention.

The tickets said 8:30, but by 8:15, there was already a goodly crowd, and an MC of sorts came out on the stage and pushed souvenirs. He said that "for the benefit of early comers," he'd managed to lay hands on a few Elvis posters and pictures, and we could hit the souvenir stands and buy 'em up before

the later arrivals, like locusts swarmed in to strip the stalls of treasure.

It wasn't a class approach, and the hype continued throughout the evening. The same guy came out again later to tell us he'd been "advised by one of Elvis' fans" that there were still some tickets available for what would be El's fourth and final concert on Sunday afternoon. Now, which of the fans had brought him the good word? Colonel Parker, maybe.

Some of us had glimpsed the big-bellied, straw-hatted, cigar-carrying Colonel, Elvis' manager, earlier in the day, when Elvis gave a press conference in a hotel ballroom jammed with freaks, little skinny girls, fat men in hippie clothes, lots of leather jackets and inane questions which Elvis fielded good-naturedly, his tongue firmly in his cheek.

To what did he ascribe his ability to hang on in the chancey music business? He had, after all, been able to sell 400 million records, go into semi-retirement, and come out again to find himself as much in demand as ever.

"I take Vitamin E," said Elvis.

A girl called out, "We love you Elvis." "Thank you, dear," said Elvis. Somebody asked Elvis' daddy, who was sharing the stage, when he'd first become aware that Elvis was going to be Really Big. Mr. Presley, a white-haired gentleman who looks like an Irish policeman, said he

thought around 1956.

"I tried to tell him sooner," said Elvis, "but he wouldn't listen."

A girl sitting next to me in the Garden that Friday night said she was 30, and she'd loved Elvis since she was 13. She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and talking to a female reporter who declared that if she'd ever had an affair with Elvis, "I'd write about it and write about it." Way down on the floor below, a large-breasted girl in a see-through pink halter traversed the aisles slowly and proudly, stopping conversations in mid-sentence.

At 8:30, the Sweet Inspirations, three black girl singers, were sent out to warm up the crowd, and the house lights went down. One of the singers said she'd been told "New York audiences are the best," and the audience applauded itself loudly. In the dark, listening to the Inspirations, you felt your senses assaulted, your circuits overloading. The music was so loud, the words a blur, and from all over the vast cavern of the Garden came flashes of blinding light (photographers popping bulbs, setting off strobes) mixed with the smaller, softer beams of the ushers' torches, and the glow of cigarettes.

The Inspirations finished, the MC came on again and introduced a comic.

Let him be nameless, poor soul, poor shnook, poor Christian thrown to lions who were waiting to be tamed, to be trained, to be mastered,

who were waiting, in fact, for anything but this little man who let them see his pain.

To begin with, his material was no good. And when the audience began to turn on him, he whined.

The rhythmic clapping began in the middle of one of his lousier jokes, and at first the comic didn't understand, or acted as though he didn't understand. "Whatza matter? You can't hear?" he cried, and grabbed another microphone.

Ah, but we could hear; that was the trouble.

He tried to settle the crowd down. "All right, friends, I'm gonna be here a few minutes," but the catcalls and boos were building, along with shouts of "We want Elvis," and the comic shared his self-pity with the audience. "You are 20,000, I am one, that's pretty rough odds."

Nobody cared. They howled until he gave up. "You win," he said, quitting the stage.

The MC appeared again, and told us we were going to have an intermission. Intermission from what? By now, we were growing restless. I said I felt sorry for the comic, and the girl who'd loved Elvis since she was 13 thought my sorrow—pure projection—was a waste of time. "He didn't have to be that bad," she said.

My husband, considering the price of what was only a moderately decent seat, agreed with her. "This is a tough town, and ten bucks is ten bucks."

It was his opinion that the crowd had been lost, that between irritating announcements about the "limited supply" of mementoes which could be had for two bucks apiece, and the ritual murder of the comic, some spirit of anticipation had been broken, a sweet eagerness had turned rancid.

He was wrong.

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At 9:15, Elvis appeared, materialized, in a white suit of lights, shining with golden appliques, the shirt front slashed to show his chest. Around his shoulders was a cape lined in cloth of gold, its collar faced with scarlet. It was anything you wanted to call it, gaudy, vulgar, magnificent. He looked like a prince from another planet, narrow-eyed, with high Indian cheekbones and a smooth brown skin untouched by his 37 years. He was girdled by a great golden belt, a present from the International Hotel in Las Vegas for breaking all attendance records ("I wear it around, just to show off," he'd said at the press conference, grinning) and when he started to work with the mike, his right hand flailing air, his left leg moving as though it had a life of its own, time stopped, and everyone in the place was 17 again.

It was a lesson in dominance; we had just seen the comic who couldn't control anybody, not even himself, and that had got us nervous; now Elvis made it all all right again.

He used the stage, he



The New York Times/Larry Morris
Elvis Presley at Madison Square Garden
"Time stopped, and everyone was 17 again"

worked to the people. The ones in front, in the best seats, the ones in back, and up in the peanut galleries. He turned, he moved, and when a girl threw a handkerchief on the stage, he wiped his forehead with it and threw it back, a gift of sweat from an earthy god.

The music was mixed, old rock with new, he did "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," and the ballad where the fellow asks the girl to lay her warm and tender body next to his,

but it was when he'd get to one of the old Elvis numbers, "It's All Right, Mama," or "Love Me Tender," that the Garden came unglued. Young girls moaned, and stood in their seats trying to dance, and one kid took a giant leap from a loge seat clear to the stage, only to be caught (by some of that army which protects Elvis from his lovers) and taken away before she could come too close to her heart's desire. You had to hope she hadn't broken her

leg in that vain but glorious effort.

It was 1956 again, and I heard a man who was pushing 40 ask his daughter, "Ain't he better than Tom Jones?" and the daughter said yes, and the father smiled. "That's all I wanted to hear —."

I thought of a Grateful Dead concert, a couple of years ago, down on Second Avenue. Motorcycle gangs roaming the corridors, the smell of grass so heavy you could scarcely avoid getting a contact high, an adolescent on a bad acid trip in the lobby, a carnival of, and for, the angry, the lost.

In Pepsi-drinking Elvis' heyday, the world was more innocent, or people were more willing to pretend it was. On the Ed Sullivan show, they used to shoot Elvis from the waist up, so the grinding of his hips wouldn't drive little girls wild, and mothers bemoaned their daughters' infatuation.

Almost 20 years later, those daughters brought their own teen-agers to hear the man whose appeal bridges a generation gap.

Once in a great while, a special champion comes along, a Joe Louis, a José Capablanca, a Joe DiMaggio, someone in whose hands the way a thing is done becomes more important than the thing itself. When DiMaggio hit a baseball, his grace made the act look easy and inevitable; whether it turned into a pop fly or a home run, it was beautiful, because he did what he did so well.

Friday night, at Madison Square Garden, Elvis was like that. He stood there at the end, his arms stretched out, the great gold cloak giving him wings, a champion, the only one in his class.